

## **BOUCHER VOTES TO STRENGTHEN VETERANS HEALTH SERVICES**

Honoring America's veterans must be an ongoing national priority which is reflected in a strong federal commitment to the needs of veterans. For that reason, ensuring that Southwest Virginia's veterans have access to high quality, easily accessible health care is one of my highest priorities in representing our region in Congress. To that end, last week I strongly supported the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act, which was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives. The measure will reform and improve veterans' health services by offering more support to wounded veterans and their families and caregivers, expanding care for female veterans, improving mental health services for veterans, and increasing access to health care for veterans in rural areas.

To address the unique needs of veterans in rural areas like Southwest Virginia, the measure expands transportation for veterans to local Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals and clinics through grants to local Veterans Service Organizations. The VA maintains hospitals in Salem, Virginia and in Johnson City, Tennessee. For many residents of the Ninth District, a drive to one of these hospitals is anything but convenient.

I have long worked with the Veterans Administration to establish community based outpatient clinics throughout our region to make access to health care services more convenient for our veterans. I am pleased that the VA has responded to my requests, and we have recently opened VA-staffed outpatient clinics in Bristol, Norton, Marion, Jonesville and Vansant. Additionally, a new clinic will be located in Wytheville. Despite the establishment of these clinics, additional convenient transportation options to VA hospitals and clinics are needed, and the measure approved by the House will expand transportation opportunities for rural veterans.

The bill also improves the health services offered to veterans. With this legislation, the VA will be able to provide care for female veterans' newborns for the first time in history. It will

also ensure that the VA can better treat veterans suffering from mental health issues by providing access to counseling and other mental health services to any member of the Armed Forces. The measure also provides the VA with resources to learn more about the tragically high suicide rate among veterans.

The legislation will also support family members and caregivers who look after our injured veterans to bring them the relief they deserve. The measure offers caregivers of veterans, who are defined as family members or non-family members who live with the veteran, training, education, counseling and mental health services as well as respite care.

The bill also addresses other veterans care matters including expanding resources for homeless veterans, prohibiting the VA from collecting copayments from veterans who are catastrophically disabled, and creating a pilot program to provide specified dental services to veterans, survivors and dependents of veterans.

The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act takes an important step forward in providing veterans the resources they deserve and builds on the accomplishments Congress has made in the past three years to improve veterans' services. Those include the new G.I. Bill to provide returning troops with the promise of a college education, historic investments in veterans' health care, and expanding economic opportunities for returning soldiers and improving care for those with PTSD. I am pleased that the House of Representatives approved this measure, which addresses the changing medical needs of our veterans and ensures that veterans have improved access to quality health care services.

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